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CHRISTMAS IN HEATHEN LANDS.

By LUCY W. WATERBURY,
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IT IS supposed that many of our beautiful Christmas customs have come down to us from our heathen ancestors. We know that the Yule log was burned in honor of the god Thor, at the feast of the winter solstice, and while some would trace the decoration of our churches to the passage in Isaiah : "The glory of Lebanon shall come into thee ; the fir tree and the pine tree and the box together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary," it is more probable, as Dean Stanley tells us, that the custom is borrowed from the heathen, who suspended green boughs and holly about their houses that the fairies and spirits of the wood might find shelter in them. Even the idea of our Christmas tree is said to be taken from the legendary "Eternal Tree," which had its roots on earth and its top in heaven.

If Christmas be no more than a time of feasting and heathen observances, it may well rank with the numerous festivals in honor of heathen gods, but while there is no doubt that in some cases it is merely this, yet we believe that to the hearts of most people in Christian lands there come with the chimes of Christmas day some faint echo of the song of the angels ; some memory of the story which the Bible has told, which poets have sung, and mothers have taught. As there can be no true Christmas for us except as the spirit of the Christ is manifested, so there can be Christmas in heathen lands only where his star has risen and where he is born in the hearts of men.

"Who is Jesus and what is Christmas ?" wrote a puzzled Japanese father to the teacher of a mission school. The answer to this question is reaching thousands of homes through the boys and girls in these Christian schools.

In India Christmas is known as "*burra din*," the great day. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that English rule in India makes it a universal holiday, but the time is surely coming when Christ's rule in India will make it in reality "the great day."

The request that I write on this subject brings vividly to mind one delightful Christmas spent among the Telugus in the city of Madras.

It was in the cool season, and the graceful palms, the evergreens of the tropics, were fresh and bright after the long rains. The vivid red of hibiscus and poinsettia, with the scarlet and orange of the flowering trees, made parks and compounds gay. The scent of jasmine and orange blossoms was an agreeable change from the ordinary Indian street odors. It seemed decidedly more like Fourth of July than like our ideal Christmas, for we had not a flake of snow nor a hint of frost ; no sort of conveniences for Santa Claus, as there is not a respectable chimney in Madras, not even on the Chepauk palace, and the children know nothing of stockings ; not a fir tree, nor a sprig of holly gladdens the eyes ; no delicious odors of mince pies and plum puddings greet us ; we pass no markets with plump white turkeys, and crimson cranberries, but pick our way through filthy streets, thronged with neglected children who never dreamed of Santa Claus, never heard of Christmas, and do not know the story of the Christ child.

And yet, in this very city, there came under my window at dawn of Christmas day the sound of singing, sweet and low, a Christmas carol, composed by one of our Christian boys, a dreamy young poet, and sung by a choir of school children. They had crept up softly and surprised us. Of course we applauded, and then came a shower of gilded limes and tiny bouquets of roses, and a happy shout, "Merry Kismis." After *chota hazree* (early breakfast) we held levee on the veranda for all our Christians, who came in gorgeous attire, several mothers carrying wee babies, clad in simple coats of oil and clutching in their brown, dimpled hands images made of pith, gay peacocks and parrots adorned with colored paper and tinsel, their presents for the missionary family. The older girls brought trays of delicious

fruits ; oranges, custard, apples, and guavas, with flowers arranged about small sticks in stiff pyramids, and sprinkled profusely with rose water. For days the Christian children had been preparing for the festival, chiefly by making dozens of small calico bags—red and purple, green and yellow. These were for the “ poor children ” from our heathen schools. Such a happy little company of tailors they were, sitting cross-legged on the veranda, boys and girls sewing busily, laughing, chattering, and whispering secrets, or breaking occasionally into song.

Excitement ran high over the box from America. There were such treasures as small wooden pencil cases, brass thimbles, workbags, each with a spool of cotton and a paper of needles ; red and blue flannel caps for the boys, with remnants of calico for jackets for the girls ; two or three scrapbooks, a pair of scissors, and a few little dolls. We could produce no sleds, nor skates, nor watches ; no chests of tools, nor sets of books, nor games ; nothing that would appeal to the cultivated taste of an American boy. There were no writing desks nor rings, no French dolls nor stick pins for the girls, but, notwithstanding these lacks, there was genuine Christmas cheer.

The older boys brought in the tree and set it up in the chapel, and the “ committee ” decorated it with paper chains and tinsel, and hung on each twig a little bag, adding oranges and ruddy pomegranates to heighten the beauty of their tree, which, I must confess, appeared to our western eyes a trifle scrubby. Still the general effect was quite Christmasy, and we were all too happy and excited to be critical.

Long before the time announced the verandas were crowded with little brown children, trembling with eagerness and torn with curiosity to see the tree. Finally the bell rang, and the line of school children marched in, the boys wearing red *panchas* and white coats, and the girls attired in new calico skirts and jackets. Their faces shone with joy, and their hair with cocoanut oil, and as they marched they sang their carols right merrily. The little heathen joined the procession, making up with extra noise what they missed in words and tune. All were seated on the floor,

packed so closely they could hardly move. Mothers crowded the doors, and peeped in the windows with exclamations and grunts of delight.

A class of girls repeated the story, "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea." How beautiful it was in the soft, liquid Telugu of these eastern maidens, the story of the young mother and the little child receiving the first Christmas offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh! The boys told of shepherds in "the same country abiding in the fields, keeping watch by nights over their flocks," and the heavenly host seemed not far away as all repeated, down to the smallest heathen, "For unto *us* is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Then the presents were distributed, the gifts from the box, and the bags filled with puppoo, a kind of parched grain, some queer oily sweetmeats, and a bit of jaggery, the black palm sugar. Eager faces manifested intense anxiety lest the supply fail, and immense relief when there proved to be enough and to spare. After games, singing, and profound salaams, the shadows of night began to fall, the school children went to their "rice," and the naked little bodies of the heathen blended with the shadows and disappeared.

In some missions they give a Sunday-school picnic, as a Christmas treat. Mrs. Ninde tells of one given in Lucknow, the "City of Roses," at the time of her visit there. Two thousand children from the Methodist Sunday schools gathered at the *Maidan*, a public park in the center of the city. There were seven great elephants adorned with crimson velvet, and gold fringe, awaiting their arrival. Mrs. Ninde and the missionaries mounted one of the large beasts, and the backs of the other six were quickly crowded with boys and girls. She inquired why there were not more elephants so that all of the children could have a ride, and was informed that only those could ride who had passed the examination. Just before Christmas all of the Sunday-school children are examined on the work of the year, and only those who can recite without mistake all of the lesson topics, golden texts, and selected verses are entitled to an elephant

ride. Mrs. Ninde felt sure she could not do this, and with a keen sense of her own unworthiness proposed to leave her lofty position; but as she was a guest she was allowed to stay. The question naturally arises, how many elephants would be required for the ordinary American Sunday school?

In Burmah we find a polyglot celebration, English, Karen, and Burmese rejoicing together. One missionary has described her Christmas surprises. Here is the list: "First a kind of bag made of the bark of the plantain tree; in it are several little packages containing tea, sugar, cocoanut, and a handkerchief with a pretty border. These are from the old Karen preacher, who lives in the compound. Next a pretty fan and a little looking-glass from Pau Pau, my right-hand girl, folded oranges in large leaves; in this package of leaves, a bit of cake from the youngest child present; an ear of corn, a tiny bottle of candy, two sheets of paper, and two needles follow; then more handkerchiefs costing three cents each, two candles in this packet, and what have we here? Ah, it is cigars! How they laugh, for I talk so strongly against smoking, but they tell me these are for my plants, so I accept them. Though these are all such trifles, they are very precious as they come laden with the 'good will' of the Christmas season."

In Singapore there are so many nationalities that four languages are required at one celebration. There were dusky Tamils from India; daughters of wealthy Chinese merchants with hair and dresses sparkling with jewels; groups of Siamese children, and hosts of Malays. After carols in Tamil, the prayer in Chinese, and the address in Malay, the gifts were distributed. Girls of twelve or thirteen, being too old to appear in public, had little remembrances sent to them. We hope, considering their great age, that these presents were especially nice.

From the hundreds of Christian centers in China we must choose only one, the Girls' School in Pekin. "On Christmas morning the beautiful cantata, 'The Star of Bethlehem,' was exquisitely rendered by the school children. The crowning event, however, was the distribution of gifts on Sunday afternoon to the heathen children. The chapel was packed with a motley crowd

of the great unwashed. Expectation was on tiptoe, for they had been told that, if they came regularly, they would receive on Christmas day a nice card, and when in addition each boy and girl was given a package, with the strict injunction not to open it until out of the chapel, it was pathetic to see them. The little girls with their dirty faces, partially concealed by paint, would caressingly hold their packages against their cheeks, smoothing them gently, and rock them back and forth crooning, "I believe it's a doll," but not a package was opened or peeped into until all were outside, and, as the missionary explained to them the coming of the Christ-child and the joy it had brought to the world, the gladness that shone in their faces was proof that some of this joy had come to their hearts. Two hundred and fifty children or more on that day received their first Christmas gifts, and in more than one hundred and fifty heathen homes the sweet story of the nativity was told by childish lips."

Like a picture on a dainty Japanese fan appear the tiny people in Glory Kindergarten at Kobe. "One purpose of the kindergarten has been—under the blue sky, beside the sea, in the shadow of the hills, yes, in the presence of thousands of shrines and temples of heathenism, at the time of the preparation and excitement attending the mere advent of the new year—to make a festival for the children which shall celebrate the birth of Christ, the King of the earth." After the songs had been practiced, the recitations learned, and the gifts all folded in snowy paper and tied with red and gold strings, which signify a gift, the room was decorated and the tree set up. A profusion of chrysanthemums, with bouquets of small pine trees, purple cabbages, and red berries, were very effective, and the teacher had made two flags of chrysanthemums, one the American and the other the Japanese, which were put on either side of the Christmas text. The fascinating Japanese shops furnished red, blue, silver, gilt, and green glass balls, with dozens of bright-colored candles for the tree. But all the decorations are as nothing to the gay little company of children who marched in, arrayed in "pale green silk, soft gray crêpe, gaily bedecked with flowers, fine sashes with over-sashes of rose pink, gold-embroidered collars,

artificial flowers for the black hair, and paint and powder for the little girls faces." Then followed the Christmas music, "Once in Royal David's City," "Heaven and Earth this Night Rejoice," "Waken, Little Children," and kindergarten songs, all sung in Japanese. After the simple Bible lesson the children played their graceful games, and enjoyed their beautiful tree, and a treat of bean paste, sugar storks, and cakes. The children, dear, quaint little figures, are extremely polite, and make low bows as they offer "ten thousand thanks" for their tiny gifts.

From the color and charm of the sunrise kingdom look into the heart of darkest Africa. In this haunt of slavery, cannibalism, fetichism, and witchcraft, is there the faintest gleam of the Star? Down the great river, through the deep forests, comes one of the very merriest accounts of a Christmas celebration. The attempt to introduce Santa Claus was not a success. He was greeted with shrieks and groans, and cries of "let me out," "it is the evil one," "it is the day of judgment." The small fry caught the infection and fled to the bedroom, while the black children crept under chairs and tables to hide themselves. Santa Claus was obliged to remove his disguise very hastily, and they were soon reassured and began to laugh and chatter and nibble their cakes and fruits. One said he thought that Elijah had returned, another that it was John the Baptist, and another that it was Satan, and all his evil deeds rose up before him. They may not need our legends of Santa Claus in Africa, but they do need the story of the Christ-child, throughout the great dark continent which nineteen centuries ago opened its gates to receive the infant Savior escaping into Egypt from the hate of the cruel king.

The true secret of a happy Christmas has come to the girls of Smyrna, and with this name comes the echo from the Revelation, "I know thy works and tribulation and poverty, but thou art rich." Rich, indeed, are these beautiful girls of the church in Smyrna today, as they decide that instead of Christmas gifts for themselves their whole effort shall go into making a blessed day for others. They repeat the words of the Lord Jesus, "When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame,

and the blind," and proceed to carry them out to the very letter. "It was a happy day in the old Konak in Manissa," writes the teacher, "when the Christmas tree was dressed. Five of our King's Daughters were delighted to carry the gifts. This picturesque old house was built by a wealthy Turk for his harem. Upstairs at each of the four corners of the great hall he built two rooms for each of his four wives, and made them to be locked and unlocked from the outside only. In one of these large apartments, now bright and cozy, the girls filled candy bags, brightened oranges, and apples with bits of gold leaf, labeled packages, and prepared candles." At last all were provided for: the dyspeptic man, the paralytic, the blind, the homeless woman, the widow with her only son, a child of seventy years, and the woman without a voice. Some planned to go the day before and clean the rooms for their poor friends, giving them a few paras for a bath. It did not need the little treat of turkey for dinner, and honey cakes for tea, to make this a memorable Christmas.

Fifty years ago Fiji was a synonym for all that is horrible and wicked. There was never a thought of peace and goodwill. What a contrast to this picture from the pen of a traveler who recently visited the islands:

"Lying at anchor, a short distance from the shore, I passed Christmas eve on deck, enjoying the perfect night of the tropics. By degrees, as the evening passed on, the sounds of life on the beach were stilled, and nothing was heard but the ceaseless rustle of the leaves of the cocoanut palms, which always hum an obligato to life in the islands. One by one the lights went out. All around lay sleeping in the rich flood of moonlight. But when the southern cross stood erect to the watchful eye, there came out sweet and clear on the heavy air of night a ringing peal of laughter, a chorus of merriment repeated time after time, until it fairly seemed that there could be nothing in life but midnight glee.

"It was the famous Fijian laughing call, which can be heard for miles, when raised by the fresh voices of women and children, and, as far as it can be heard at all, it never loses its qual-

ity of merriment. At once the light of torches was seen beneath the trees, gathering toward the beaches, and at either side of the town. Then songs arose from each of the centers of light. On the one hand were the voices of the boys, on the other the girls were singing apart: yet not apart, for each group of singers alternated the verses of the song of praise, and the chorus was in unison across the sandy gap. The song was a hymn of Christ's nativity. The words were Christian, but the air was an old Fijian festival chorus, which has been transferred to the new Christian feast. Verse after verse was sung, and with each the parts of the choir drew nearer to each other along the beach, and at last their voices and their torches were in one, and the song rose even clearer through the gentle night, as these children sang their waits before the town.

"In the morning no man went forth to work, no woman took her nets upon the reef, for Christmas is kept like Sunday. There was a service in the church, a service of song where every voice was heard, a service of rejoicing as befits the day."

And so after centuries of gross darkness and wrong the star of Bethlehem begins again to shine in the East, and the hearts of wise men everywhere are turning toward the light which guides to the Savior of the world.

"The dark night wakes, the morning breaks,
And Christmas comes once more."

NOTE.—The periodicals of the Woman's Board of Missions, Congregational, the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, and of the Woman's Baptist Foreign Missionary Society have aided in furnishing material for this article.